

Editors Note: While Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Congressman Larry Combest served as Vice Chairman of the Presidential Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy. In March 1997, the Commission concluded its work with recommendations on limiting the amount of secrets and how to best protect those secrets.

Keeping the Secrets That Really Matter **By U.S. Representative Larry Combest (R-Texas)**

American citizens have a great deal of common sense. They do not want their government withholding information they need to make an informed decision about national policy. But neither do they want their government revealing things that ought to be concealed. They accept the proposition that some things must be kept hidden.

I unequivocally endorse the public's right of access to much government-held information. Too much information is classified and kept too long in secret. Currently, there are over 1.5 billion pages of government records over 25 years old in government vaults that are still classified. Reasonable access to information is a prerequisite for maintaining an informed citizenry, and for maintaining public confidence in the institutions of government.

It is true that too much secrecy, and the abuse of the public's right to know, can erode respect for government. On the other hand, failure to carry out the vital mission of protecting the nation and the American people will undermine the legitimacy of government far more quickly and surely.

This is not an abstract intellectual issue. The U.S. Constitution charges the Federal Government with the duty of providing for the common defense and securing the blessings of liberty. Because the Government must pursue those vital purposes in a dangerous world, the Government must be able to keep secrets. Failure to do so, even out of a well-intentioned desire to open up the processes and archives of government, may cause irreparable harm to the nation, and may cause loss of life.

Espionage directed against the United States has not ended now that the Soviet threat is gone. Threats to the continental United States, to our citizens and troops abroad, and to our vital interests are more widespread and less manageable.

In one sense, the cold war of struggle and competition between nations is never over.

The Government has a solemn moral obligation to protect those individuals who provide information at the risk to their own lives. Methods and sources of gathering that information could be compromised by the hasty declassification and bulk release of government documents. A hostile foreign intelligence service can deduce patterns in the way the United States gathers sensitive information. Informants and allies abroad would be much more reluctant to confide in U.S. intelligence or government officials for fear of being compromised in a rush to declassify.

A government that remains within its proper Constitutional limits, that focuses on its proper Constitutional priorities, and that does not attempt to meddle in the daily lives and routine affairs of its citizens, should not be feared if it also attempts to keep some things secret. The growing

fear of government secrecy is linked directly to the growth of government power and intrusiveness.

The Costs

It will cost many millions to declassify rapidly and release the huge store of currently classified material. Every government expenditure ought to have a cost-benefit. To be sure, the amount of classified material in government hands is enormous, too enormous. But President Clinton's 1995 Executive Order 12958 requires the automatic declassification of all documents over 25 years old by the year 2000. This five-year deadline will impose a huge and costly burden, diverting trained specialists and limited resources from intelligence functions far more vital to national security. It would make more sense to focus on releasing documents with public policy or historic significance, rather than engage in a heroic and costly effort to release the entire store of classified documents in haste.

What is required are people who have the competence and good judgment to operate in the zone of tension between divergent goals reducing secrecy (which includes limits on the ability of government officials to classify documents) while protecting what needs to be protected.

Better accountability, whether it comes through statute or through executive order, will work both ways: making sure that unnecessary classification does not happen, and also that a sudden zeal for openness does not inadvertently compromise highly sensitive information.

Government officials, members of the Intelligence Community, and military personnel are still the targets of attempts to "turn" them. In streamlining and standardizing the personnel security system, the U.S. cannot afford to compromise in any degree the requirement for stability and loyalty in the people who will have access to classified material.

Because government secrecy has been abused, we must not overreact and send the pendulum swinging too far in the opposite direction. The government must be made to jettison its needless secrets and behave in a more open manner. Government officials must be more subject to limits on what they can classify. But in our rush to widen access, we must not compromise vital secrets, nor betray those who have risked their lives and fortunes to confide in us. We must make sure greater access and openness do not become a remedy more deadly than the disease they purport to cure.